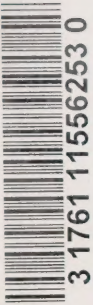


JOHNNY NATIONAL, SUPER HERO BY TOMSON HIGHWAY

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ILLUSTRATED BY LEO YERXA





JOHNNY NATIONAL, SUPER HERO



AAA
ABORIGINAL
**HEAD
START**
INITIATIVE



Introduction



Welcome to our story. It is a story about all of us who have a part in the Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) program in urban and northern communities, our families, our histories and our neighbourhoods. And it is a story about our future.

Johnny National and Suzie Sunset and the others we are about to meet happen to live in Winnipeg, Manitoba. They tell us their story, hoping that in the telling, the pictures and words will strengthen our understanding of the importance and power of Aboriginal Head Start for children and families. Read and listen, and picture the children and the parents, Elders, tricksters and others you will meet, with names and faces of people in your own community. The story of Johnny National reflects the experience of people that Aboriginal Head Start participants know—people that we want to give other Canadians the opportunity to meet.

There are 3,500 Aboriginal children across Canada participating in Aboriginal Head Start in cities large and small, and in diverse smaller communities in the coastal regions, plains, woodland areas and in the Far North. The children are Métis, First Nations and Inuit. The history and values of the local community are the foundations of each AHS site. You will see this in the cultural programming, and in the almost thirty Aboriginal languages that are spoken in the classrooms.

AHS projects teach in a way that parents and children enjoy. You should see those little Métis kids jigging (the traditional Métis step dance)! And Inuit children throat singing! And First Nations children pow wow dancing! These are colourful, joyous images, but what is more subtle is that, in over 100 AHS sites, you will see children grow in their understanding and pride in their Aboriginal identity.

The author of this story, Tomson Highway, is a Cree storyteller, playwright and musician. He visited a number of sites, and while experiencing the essence and nuances of Aboriginal Head Start as he played with the children, he was able to create a composite picture of the program as the setting for this story. Tomson also read letters and reports from AHS parents and staff that told of their experiences and impressions of the program. Johnny and Dorothy National are created from the experiences of these AHS participants.

Many 'Dorothys' report that their association with AHS had given them the support and self confidence to return to school or to find employment. Mothers and fathers are grateful that opportunities to strengthen their parenting skills has improved their relationships with their children. They are proud of their children's mastery of new skills and of the positive changes in their behaviour. Young mothers talk about their isolation and shyness, and how getting to know the staff and other parents in the program has introduced them to new relationships and resources in the community, as well as contributing to their personal well-being. Many report that being part of the parent committee had helped them to develop new skills and confidence.

Some of the fathers participating in the AHS program express their frustration at wanting to be good role models for their children, but finding this difficult without employment. At least three of these fathers in one city found employment as cooks and bus drivers for AHS. Their experiences volunteering in the classroom, and as members of Parent Advisory Committees, generate in them an enthusiasm for AHS, and they are proud to be a part of the working team.

Several parents and grandparents are employed as teacher aides as a result of their involvement in the program, and some have gone on to take early childhood education training. Some of them never had jobs before, and are now employed in positions that recognize their talents and encourage further training. There are also a few dramatic stories of mothers whose lives were desperate due to addictions, or unhealthy relationships and lifestyles, who found strength to turn their lives around through encouragement from other parents and program staff, and through referrals to supportive agencies.

AHS early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers report that AHS graduates are entering kindergarten with good school readiness skills. In some communities, the previous kindergarten

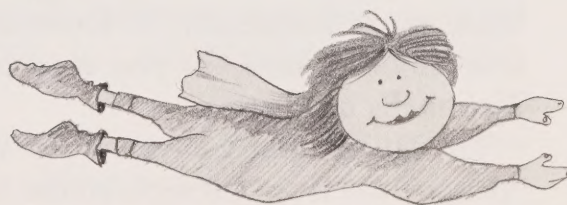
curriculum has had to be revised to meet the needs of these able learners whose social and academic skills surpass the norms of prior enrollments that did not have the benefit of the AHS program. A number of children are benefiting from referrals to specialists, and receiving early diagnosis and treatment for health problems or learning difficulties due to careful observation by the project staff working with them.

Johnny National's classroom, being in the city as it is, has much in common with other programs across Canada, but the expression of the components of the program sometimes differs due to regional and cultural distinctions in the communities. Lunches and snacks in an Inuit centre could be caribou stew and Arctic char, while in Saskatchewan it might be wild rice casserole and saskatoon berry muffins. The cultural activities, under the guidance of Elders, vary according to local traditions, with expressions through dance, stories, the gathering and preparation of food and participation in ceremonies being the most common celebrations of cultural distinction.

Traditional stories will vary regionally, as will the form of the Spirit who lives in them. Weesageechak, Nanabush, Raven, Coyote, Mouse Woman, Sedna and Lumaaq are some of the teachers that will visit the children in their story circles. As they are with us in the story of Johnny National, Superhero.

Lynne Robertson
National Evaluation Analyst
Aboriginal Head Start (Urban and Northern Communities)
Health Canada

November 2000



Johnny National, Super Hero

a story about Aboriginal Head Start that could be true



Jonathon Charles National is four years old. He lives in Winnipeg. He much prefers the name, “Johnny National,” however. Why? Because his older brother, Cody, said to him one night, as they were drifting off to sleep, “sounds like Superman or something.” Ever since that night, Johnny National not only loves the new, shorter name, he has these dreams where he is flying through the sky wearing bright red tights and a cape, just like the man in his brother’s comic books. Except that, unlike Superman’s, Johnny National’s cape is not completely red. Rather, it is red only at the top and at the bottom. In between, it is white. White with a big red maple leaf right in the middle.

Being Cree, Johnny National is as brown as a berry. He has straight black hair that falls around his ears and deep dark eyes that sometimes look like bright coat buttons. And he is tiny, standing at a height of just a little more than three feet, four inches. This has Dorothy National slightly worried—what if her child turns out to be a midget? Nah, couldn’t be; there are no midgets in her family tree, none whatsoever. Still, she finds her little boy can be just a little sullen—he doesn’t smile enough. How to make that little mouth smile more frequently, is Dorothy National’s constant challenge. Dorothy National, as you may have guessed by now, is Johnny National’s mother.

Though he himself was born in Winnipeg, Johnny National’s “people” are from a reserve in the far north of the province. At least, his mother’s people are. Achagoosis Falls (Cree for “Little Star Falls”) is the name of this reserve and it is twelve hours north of Winnipeg. But that’s if you travel there by bus. By car, it takes a little less time, at least so says Dorothy National. Still, little Johnny

National has only been once to Little Star Falls, and not by car, for his mother can't afford one. Not only that, but she has never learned to drive. So the one time that Johnny National went to Little Star Falls, he traveled there by bus. And he was only two then. So how does he remember? He doesn't. At least, not really. All he remembers, and this only very faintly, is his grandfather's face.

There. The wrinkled brown face of old Lazurus National, looking down at tiny Johnny National as if from the sky. He is saying words the little boy can't understand. And then he's gone, leaving little Johnny National standing there all by himself. What did grandpa say to him?

Johnny National of Winnipeg—though he prefers “Johnny National of Little Star Falls,” even though he knows he's been there only once—doesn't know his father. In fact, he doesn't know who his father is, and neither does anyone. In fact, it is even doubtful that his mother, Dorothy National, really knows herself. People on “the rez” have said as much, something Dorothy National doesn't much appreciate. All that is suspected is that this man—that is, Johnny National's father—might be Aboriginal or, at least, partly Aboriginal, and that he might be an easterner. Which would mean that he could be Ojibway, he could be a Mohawk, he could even be a Mi'kmaq. As for Dorothy National herself, if she has any secrets on the subject, she's not telling. All of which means that, when it comes to the crunch, little Johnny National is only half-Cree, his other half a jumble of wild conjecture, idle speculation, or just plain gossip which, as every Indian knows, is the most unreliable source of information in the world.

Dorothy National is twenty-six years old. And besides her Johnny, she has one other child, a seven-year-old boy named Cody. The only thing is, she had Cody by a different man. In other words, Johnny National's father and Cody National's father, brothers as the boys may be, are two completely different men. And both old memories in Dorothy National's life, in Cody National's life, and in Johnny National's life.

Much as he would like to, Johnny National doesn't get to spend all the time he wants with his sole sibling, however. For, being seven years of age, Cody National is in school already—grade one at Stevenson Public in northwest Winnipeg, near McPhillips Avenue. And because Dorothy National is single—no husband, no boyfriend, nothing in the world to help her with the raising of her sons—she





has to work. And because she barely has her grade ten, the best she can do is “chambermaid,” Radisson Hotel, airport strip. Both of which situations—that is, brother in school, mother at work—would have left little Johnny National at home, all by himself. Or would have. If it hadn’t been for three lucky situations.

The first “lucky situation” is that Camelia Oocheestatay lives in Winnipeg. Who is Camelia Oocheestatay? She is Dorothy National’s sister, older by a decade, but the only other member of Dorothy National’s family—five girls, five boys—to have left the reserve to try it out in the city. And the parents of these people, that is, Dorothy and Camelia’s parents, that is, Johnny National’s grandparents? Now well into their sixties, Lazarus and Harriet National are still alive, though not quite well, for each wears a “mistik ooskat” (“wooden leg,” Cree for “prosthesis”), diabetes having made amputation necessary. Unfortunate as that may be, one bright feature about this extended-family arrangement, such as it is, is that Johnny National gets to spend one day a week, most weeks, with his crotchety aunt, Camelia Ocheestatay (which, by the way, means “gristle,” in Cree, Camelia Ocheestatay having married a Cree dry-waller from northern Alberta twenty years before).

The second “lucky situation” is that Arabella McBobbin lives next door. For Mrs. McBobbin’s apartment, disaster zone that it may be, is where Dorothy National leaves Johnny National when she goes off to work, that is, the four days of the week when Camelia Ocheestatay, too, is at work.

The third “lucky situation” is that a program called “Aboriginal Head Start” exists in Winnipeg. For if it didn’t, Dorothy National would have been in hot water. Johnny National, however, would have been in even hotter water. Why? Because, almost for certain, he indeed would have been left at the apartment next door, with Arabella McBobbin, whose care-giving Dorothy National doesn’t feel completely good about. In fact, the situation makes her increasingly uneasy.

For one thing, the building that they live in is one of those run-down, three-story, red-brick, subsidized-housing affairs, eighteen units to a building, four buildings in a row, every one of them identical as peas, in a section of town with a seedy reputation, meaning drug-dealers, “motorcycle people,” even prostitutes—female and male—either live there or frequent the place, especially late at night. Or so the stories go... But what else can Dorothy

National, on her pittance of a salary, afford? Three hundred and fifty dollars a week? For a family of three?

Say, Johnny National had been left indefinitely in such a place. Then who knows what might have happened? Does Arabella McBobbin, after all, not have the annoying tendency to let her wards run loose in the hallways of the building, on the streets, in alleyways pocked with used needles, used condoms, used lives, used everything, Johnny National being just one of five small children left in Arabella McBobbin's care most days of the week? He could end up joining one of those Indian youth gangs you read about in the paper, some of whose members are as young as eight years of age, Dorothy National has read, children selling drugs for drug lords, children shooting people, with guns, children killing people! She doesn't even want to think about it.

For, sooner or later, the Children's Aid Society would have heard about "the situation" and, boom! Johnny National would be claimed by the government. And who knows what kind of hell Dorothy National would have gone through just trying to reclaim him? More than once, in fact, she has had nightmares about such a possible development. And here's how these nightmares go...

The government puts Johnny National up for adoption—it's happened many times before, to too many others. And though the chances are less likely in this enlightened day and age, Dorothy National prays to herself as she grapples with these nightmares, let's say he is adopted by a non-native family. And let's say this non-native family—affluent, well-meaning, kind-hearted as it may be—re-locates eventually to some faraway place, Texas, say, or Holland, maybe even Australia. It's happened many times before, to too many others.

Effectively, Dorothy National agonizes to herself, little Johnny National has just been "disappeared," "disappeared" from his family, "disappeared" from his community, "disappeared" from his country, "disappeared" from his bloodline, like so, so many other Indian kids have in the past. Meaning that his life has just been torn right down the middle. Whether he's aware of it, fully, at the time or not, it's just been ripped, shredded, bent right out of shape. And if it's true what they say, that the first six years of a child's life either make, or fail to make, the final human being, "Well, we've just seen little Johnny National 'fail to be made'," Dorothy National whispers to herself as she lies there staring at the ceiling smoking a cigarette. She





doesn't even know anymore if she's awake or asleep, these images are coming at her so swiftly, one after another after another.

For having been but four years old when all this transpired, chances are that Johnny National would, indeed, remember being torn from the arms of his mother. In fact, he would never forget it. Even if he tried blotting out the episode, he would be utterly incapable. Which is to say that the chances of recovery from such a shock—and what is meant here is full recovery, full healing—would indeed, for Johnny National, be pretty well nil. The aftershocks, flashbacks, even dreams that recur, in one form or another, at one level of his subconscious or another, would follow him right into adulthood, right into his old age, right up to his deathbed, should that deathbed come at sixty, eighty, ninety, or a hundred. Imagine—hurting, and hurting that bad, for that length of time.

And the things that trauma would affect—his marriage, his children, his profession... They say that among the angriest, most cruel, most evil, most powerful—and most pathetic—men in the history of the world are men whose psyches were inflicted with inhumanity of this nature when they were very young children, that is, at some point in their first six years.

Or you see them on the streets, the wounded and the maimed—that is, those without the smarts for the mad race to power, like the dictators of the world—lost, pathetic souls every one of them, huddled over air-vents, holding out their hands, begging you for change. Or you see them in the board rooms of the nation, pushing other people, treating them with rudeness, treating them with cruelty, trying desperately to prove that they are the strongest, that they are the ones most deserving of your undying admiration, your endless adulation, your love implicit, explicit, unconditional. You see them at the heads of major corporations, gargantuan business enterprises with the power to decide, one can almost swear, how much longer the world will last. And you sometimes even see them—and if you haven't seen them yet, you will someday—at the heads of governments.

Not only would the damage to Johnny National's psyche have been considerable, in other words, it would have been permanent, eventually affecting everyone around him, even those who never knew him. "Are the prisons, after all, of countries everywhere not filled with cases such as this? And are we not—all of us—paying through the nose to support them, with our taxes, year in, year out,"

the TV man's voice is shouting at Dorothy National now, like a preacher gone insane. Dorothy National can't be sure she's hearing all of this but it's there, this torrent of words. And, what's more, she can only half-comprehend it.

Then she wakes up. She is sitting upright, stiff as a board. And she is sweating, sweating profusely. But, thank God, her baby is sleeping peacefully away, right there in his bed with his older brother, just four feet away from her. She takes a deep, long breath. Then she slips out of her bed, goes to hug him where he sleeps, hugs him with a tenderness that is almost fierce. Then she looks out at the moon. No one ever told her motherhood was going to be like this!

Thank God, Johnny National hasn't gone through a process such as Dorothy National just saw in her nightmare, at least not yet. Thank God that Arabella McBobbin lives next door. Thank God, Camelia Ocheestatay lives in the city, even though her little house is over five miles away by city bus. And thank God for the existence of Aboriginal Head Start, for that means, for certain, that Johnny National can stay forever with his mother if he wants to. And he can stay with his brother. And he can stay with his aunt, crotchety as she can be.

The only thing is: where is Johnny National's father? And where, for that matter, is Cody National's father? And where, for that matter, are the fathers of three-quarters of Johnny National's friends at the Kimoosoom Papoo Aboriginal Head Start Program on Ballantyne Boulevard? Did someone come along and murder all of them? Did someone come along and murder all the fathers in the world? What's going on here?

Evidently, for some reason, they don't get along with mothers. Evidently, for some reason, men don't get along with women, and women don't get along with men, at least, so it would appear. Were they ever made for each other in the first place? The question must be asked. Because, for sure, Johnny National's dad and Johnny National's mom didn't get along. He left her, did he not? Or did she kick him out?

Johnny National is sure he remembers—then again, he can't really, really, really be sure—but he seems to remember shouting voices, a man's and a woman's, their shouting voices dancing all over the moon-mottled ceiling in the tiny little bedroom he shared with his mother and his brother, the roses on the pink wallpaper trembling, shivering from the impact of the words. And he remembers, Johnny



National does, that the walls behind that pink wallpaper were very, very thin because he could hear them—his mother... and this man.

“I love him!” Johnny National hears the man screaming, “I love my son!” Then a punch. Then his mother wailing. And then Johnny National got so frightened that he closed his eyes, closed them real tight. Closed his ears, too. He must have been two; after all, they say that some kids remember things—colors, smells, sounds—that happened as early as age one. All by way of saying that that’s all Johnny National remembers of this man is his voice. Never saw him once. Never knew his name. Never touched him. Never even smelled him. Just the voice—“I love him! I love my son!” Punch. Wail.

So does this mean that Johnny National, once he’s a grown man, will be punching women in the face in the pale moonlight, just like this shouting, crying man? Or was his mind playing tricks on him that night, just like it did that time—yesterday, was it? In the playroom at “school?”—when his favorite song, from that cartoon movie, the Lion King, “Somewhere, in the Pale Moonlight,” was playing on the CD player and he heard a man outside, on the street somewhere, yelling something with the word, “love,” inside it ... he thinks.

In any case, he likes “school,” as he calls it, this room he gets to come to almost every day, this room filled with so many things to play with, with so many things to learn.

The thing about Johnny National’s education is that, under normal circumstances, it would have been nurtured by his huge extended family, especially at his tender age. That is to say, his mother would have “taught him the essentials,” as would his father, his four grandparents, his aunts and his uncles, even his older cousins, of whom Johnny National has many, his mother coming as she does from a family of twelve: ten children, two parents. But these are not normal circumstances. If anything, they are most abnormal circumstances. For, you see, not only does Johnny not live anywhere near any of these relatives—except, of course, for the redoubtable and crotchety Camelia Ocheestatay—but they hardly even talk to his mother. That Dorothy National’s own family hardly ever talks to her, their own daughter and sister, is a shocking situation, but it happens, even in the wealthiest of families. Thank God for the existence of kind, forgiving people like Camelia Ocheestatay.





"There may be a hundred of them bastards," snorts Dorothy National as she rakes her vacuum cleaner furiously across the carpet at the Radisson, "but for me, they are zero, zilch, maw keegway, that's how often I see them, that's how often they visit me, phone me, that's how much they help me with my kids." And, let me tell you, the tale of Dorothy National's estrangement from her family is loaded down with history.

To begin with, Little Star Falls is a Catholic Reserve, as it has been for the last three generations, as is practically every single reserve in northern Manitoba. The problem is that the brand of Catholicism practiced in Little Star Falls, in particular, is quite rigorous, shall we say. For instance, one is not allowed to marry a Protestant. That's what the missionaries said. And that's what the people do. If they do—that is, marry a Protestant—then when they die, they go straight to hell. So people live in fear.

Unfortunately, that's exactly what Dorothy National went and did. That is, not only did she marry a Protestant man—Cody's father, a year before Cody was born, though the marriage lasted barely two years—but she married him inside a Protestant church, a United Church, to be precise, in Portage La Prairie, one hundred miles west of Winnipeg. This was a mortal sin. Which is effectively what cut Dorothy National off from her family forever. They are not on speaking terms, haven't been for years, and more than likely won't be for a long time to come. Except, of course, for the crotchety but understanding Camelia Ocheestatay.

So there we have it: Dorothy National and her tiny little brood living all by themselves in the city of Winnipeg with no one to fend for her or for her children. But herself.

Under normal circumstances, you see, Johnny National would have been living up in Little Star Falls, speaking rapid-fire Cree with his old grandparents, he would have learned the ways of his natural environment, which is the lakes, the rivers, and the forests of northern Manitoba. He would have learned how to fish, he would have learned how to hunt, he would have learned how to snare rabbits. He would have learned to listen to the wind, tell direction by the stars, relate the tales of the Trickster and his ways with the world, with people, and with, "K'si-mantou," the Great Spirit. But not only does he spend his days watching TV at the next door neighbor's, a smelly, old woman whom he doesn't even like, but he

is very, very lonely. And he is angry that he doesn't have a father like the boys down the street, or like the kids on TV.

And his mother? Not only is Dorothy National angry. Not only is she also very lonely. But she is having a very hard time just keeping house and home together. In other words, she is desperate.

So one rainy Saturday, barely two years back, she ends up going to a social at the local Friendship Center, "dragged there" by a fellow chambermaid at the Radisson Hotel, Minnie Cook by name, Metis, from somewhere on the east side of Lake Manitoba. As she's sitting there sipping at a lukewarm coffee, Dorothy National finds a flyer on the table. "Aboriginal Head Start," it says, in great, black letters. It's a program for pre-school Native children. She takes the flyer home with her, calls the number at the bottom, gets an assessment done on her living circumstance and, bingo, Johnny National is registered at Aboriginal Head Start. Now she doesn't have to leave her baby with the practically invalid, grossly overweight Mrs. McBobbin, the next door neighbor whom she suspects is not doing a very good job of caring for her Johnny anyway.

Four mornings a week, Johnny National is picked up in a van—George N. Smith, the driver's name is, a smiling Saulteaux from Rousseau River way—and he is driven, together with a bunch of children mostly his age, to the Aboriginal Head Start site on Ballantyne Boulevard, close to downtown. "Kimoosoom Papoo," the site is called, Cree for "Your Grandpa is Laughing." Good name that. For that's what the kids do, the ones who go there—do a lot of laughing with the grandpas (and with the grandmas) who go there to be with them twice a week, sometimes even more. (And why is the site called, "Kimoosoom Papoo" as opposed to "Koogoom Papoo," that is, "Grandma is Laughing?" Because the people who started the site wanted dearly to name it after an old man who was instrumental in kicking it to life and who laughed all the time but who refused, warning them that "The Muskooses Kimatayayapiyipiyay Aboriginal Head Start Site" would be too long for the sign as well as for the cheque and, besides, people couldn't pronounce it," so they settled for the next best thing which was, "Kimoosoom Papoo.")

At first, Johnny National was a bit shy. For one thing, he wasn't good at talking. Even at home, he hardly ever talked. In fact, his vocabulary consisted of ten, maybe twelve words, and even these were garbled, hard for others to understand. Besides, he didn't speak up; you could barely hear his voice. Dorothy National was worried.



"Four years old and he can't talk," she explained to the Aboriginal Head Start Co-ordinator, a young Ojibway woman from the Thunder Bay area named Burlene Baboojin.

So Burlene Baboojin, who had her diploma in ECE (Early Childhood Education) from the Red River College in west-end Winnipeg, decided she would make a concerted, though gentle, little effort to help Johnny National learn how to speak, and speak clearly, intelligently. If truth be known, in fact, several of the forty children entrusted to her care—twenty in the morning, twenty in the afternoon—had trouble with their speech.

So she read them stories from books, very simple books with pretty, colored pictures, that related the adventures of animals who could talk, for instance, animals who did fascinating things like build houses, fly kites, go on picnics, dance. For this, they would sit around a big round table, eight children in total, some younger than Johnny, some just a little older, four little boys, four little girls, eight tiny little chairs—oops, a ninth for Burlene Baboojin, though SHE was way too big for a chair that size, but no matter. The other twelve children in the morning session, meanwhile, were in other parts of the room doing other things like playing house or building things with Lego. But right now, Johnny National was interested in tales about horses who could do square-dancing and say things like, "bow to the left," and "bow to the right." It made him laugh to see animals wearing shirts, pants, and skirts bowing this way and that.

Burlene Baboojin turned the page and a man horse, standing on his hind legs, was swinging a laughing lady horse right around like a big sack of potatoes while another man horse, wearing a hat, was yelling, "Swing your partner round and round!" and another horse was sawing away at an old brown fiddle, tapping his feet to the rhythm of the music, "tippy-tap, tippy-tap, tippy-tap-tap-tap," read Burlene Baboojin from the book with pretty pictures. Then she turned the page.

"Doe-si-doe!" yelled the horse with the hat, and all the horses—"one, two, three, four," Johnny National counted them in secret to himself but then lost count but he was sure there were more—all the horses danced around each other, back to back, two and two for, apparently, that's what the word, "doe-si-doe," meant to them. By this time, Johnny National was so excited that he yelled, "Doe-si-doe!" without knowing it (even though his earlier "one, two, three, four" had been as silent as a wind).



Burlene Baboojin turned the page again and the horses, finished dancing, were shaking hooves with each other and saying things like, “thank you very much, thank you very much.” At least that’s what Burlene Baboojin read to the kids. And even Johnny National caught himself saying, “thank you very much, thank you very much,” to the girl on his right, a little Sioux pixie named Suzie Sunset. “Thank you very much, thank you very much,” said little Suzie Sunset back to little Johnny National and Johnny National grabbed Suzie Sunset by the pigtails and did a little jig. Unfortunately, he pulled too hard, so hard, in fact, that Suzie Sunset wailed, “owww!” and Burlene Baboojin had to come to the rescue.

“No,” said the Coordinator firmly to Johnny, “You can’t do that. It’s not right to do that. Say you’re sorry.” Johnny National stood there mortified. His face went red. What had he done now? He started crying.

“Come on,” Burlene Baboojin’s voice went all gentle, kind, “Apologize to Suzie. Say ‘I’m sorry.’” Humiliating as the whole thing was, Johnny National turned to little Suzie Sunset who, to him, at the moment, for some reason, looked like a blueberry.

“Sorry,” said Johnny National shyly to little Suzie Sunset. His voice was barely audible.

“Thank you very much,” said little Suzie Sunset.

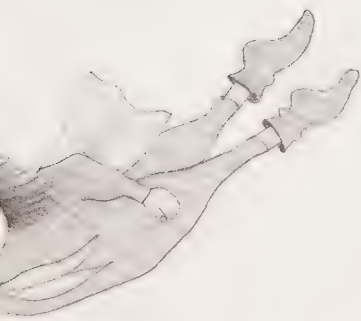
Then Burlene Baboojin took the storybook in hand again and told Johnny and Suzie to sit back down. Then she announced she would be asking them questions about the story just read. For this, she explained, they would all have to answer, one by one.

“What did the horse with the hat say to the other horses?” asked Burlene Baboojin, “On this page?” No one there knew the answer. “Bow to the left,” said Burlene Baboojin and turned to another page.

“What did the horse with the hat say on this page?” asked Burlene Baboojin.

“Doe-si-doe!” yelled Suzie Sunset and laughed like a xylophone. Johnny National looked at her. Already, he was getting jealous. How come she knew so much and he didn’t?

Then Burlene asked another question, this time directly to Johnny. But he had been distracted; he hadn’t heard the question. Besides, he was shy. He was too shy to speak out loud, when he knew everyone was watching him, waiting for his answer. Something inside him went all crumbly and weak. He was scared. He was terrified. But Burlene Baboojin smiled at him anyway, then went on to another



page, another question, for another child. And Johnny National snuck away to a corner to build a house with blocks.

At supper that evening, however, sitting at the table with his mother and his brother—macaroni and cheese with weiners on the side—his mother asked him what he had done at “school” that day. And Johnny National proudly told his mother and his brother, loud and clear for everyone to hear, “Bow to the right, bow to the left, swing your partner, doe-si-doe, thank you very much!” Dorothy National almost fainted on the spot.

Mrs. Arabella McBobbin was not the cleanest of people. In fact, she was quite messy. She left used dishes on the counter, she left used dishes on the table, she left used dishes in the sink, sometimes for days, sometimes until you practically needed a hammer to pound them back apart, they were stuck that hard together. Dorothy National had seen this, on more than one occasion—not the hammer part, but the sticky-dirty-dishes part. Part of the problem, of course, came from the fact, even Dorothy National herself had to admit, that the fading old widow could barely even move. For one thing, she was afflicted with some condition whereby her legs, which were all puffed out, like bread dough, could hardly straighten themselves out. For another thing, even if she were to try standing up, she was so overweight that it was doubtful legs such as hers could actually hold her vertical. So, like Humpty-Dumpty, Mrs. Arabella McBobbin sat all day, sunk into her ratty old armchair, watching game shows on TV, or doing simple crossword puzzles with a pencil. And let the five small children left all too frequently in her care run around like Italian bumper cars, spilling Kool-Aid here, Coca-Cola there, Sprite here, Root Beer there, scattering cheezies, chips, and half-melted Slushies all over the place, eating things off a carpet that Dorothy National was sure hadn’t seen real cleaning in a decade. There were mice. There were cockroaches. And only by accident, one day, did Dorothy National learn that the little Johnson girl in Arabella McBobbin’s care, the “Nicolette” who took too much joy in torturing her Johnny by stabbing him with pencils, pens, even forks, was the daughter of “a dancer.”

“What kind of “dancer?” Dorothy National had finally had the nerve to ask Mrs. McBobbin one afternoon.

“Oh, you know,” the rheumy old crone had answered, “dancer. Dancer who go...” and for this, Mrs. McBobbin had raised both hands to her sagging, weary breasts and made motions with them





(the hands, not the breasts) that approximated what looked, to Dorothy National, like a propeller on a plane taking off. Dorothy National never really understood what Mrs. McBobbin had meant by that motion, not that day anyway; in fact, it would take two whole weeks for her finally to get “the message” when, after work one day, in the hallway just outside Mrs. McBobbin’s, she ran, literally, into Mrs. Johnson—Delilah Rose Johnson in her tight miniskirt and her pointy, red stilettos, Delilah Rose Johnson wearing so much make-up that she looked like a cheesecake, Delilah Rose Johnson just stepping up to the door with the evident intention of fetching her four-year-old daughter, Nicolette, when Dorothy herself came barreling right around the corner with a similar agenda. Literally, Dorothy National bumped right into Delilah Rose Johnson. And not only did Delilah Rose Johnson smell like an ashtray, she had needle marks on her arms, on the inside, right where the upper arm meets the lower. Dorothy National had heard of such marks. But what could she do about them? Could she move away, for instance? No. Of course not. Mrs. McBobbin was practically her sole support, at least at the time.

“Oh,” the words, for some reason, had pierced Dorothy National’s heart like a needle at that moment, “That kind of dancer.” Minutes later, as she was walking hand-in-hand down the hallway with her Johnny, she found herself wondering: “I wonder how much money Delilah Rose Johnson makes at the...wherever it is she does her...whatever? I mean, those aren’t exactly Salvation Army clothes that she’s wearing, are they now? Not like I’m wearing...”

For, God, she hated her job, she hated her job, she hated her job, she hated Mrs. Pocklin, that jungle-mouthed, halitosis-stricken old war-horse of a boss! How she hated her job, which was sometimes so exhausting that it robbed her of time with children, such as giving them baths, clipping their fingernail, cutting their hair, helping them brush their teeth, helping them eat right, reading to them, telling them stories... Only occasionally, in fact, was she able to do such things. “Occasionally,” however, was just not enough. Fortunately, that was almost two years ago.

Now, she sends her Johnny to Aboriginal Head Start four days a week, even though it’s only the mornings. For at least—and her thoughts are turning like a wheel as she’s making Johnny toast in the morning; George N. Smith, after all, will be here with the van within minutes to drive Johnny to Kimoosoom Papoo—for at least what

those four mornings a week do for her is make it affordable to send Johnny to a proper daycare on the afternoons of those four days, now THAT she can afford, even though she still has to shop Sally Ann and Value Village, but never mind that part, darn if she's gonna end up with a life like Delilah Rose Johnson's.

And the fifth day of the week? All day Friday? Ta-da! Johnny National gets to spend eight hours with his crotchety Aunt Camelia Ocheestatay, who takes him, post haste, to the bingo on McPhillips smack in the middle of the day and where she smokes one cigarette after another after another after another after another together with a thousand or so other Native women. Johnny National has never seen smoke like that in his life! So much smoke that it looks like the cloud in the book Burlene Baboojin showed them at school one day, the cloud that serves as a pillow for God when he sleeps, according to Burlene Baboojin.

But on the mornings of those four days, that is Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday? The first thing Burlene Baboojin and her assistants—of which she has four, namely Rita, Anita, Conchita, and Pita (which is just her nickname for, apparently, her real name, being Inuk from Pond Inlet, is Akka)—the first thing Burlene Baboojin and her assistants make them do (after they make them take off their hats, scarves, coats, mittens, boots) is make them wash their hands and their faces in the sink, using real soap and hot water, some kids in the washroom, some kids in the kitchen where Rita and Anita normally prepare snacks for everybody. And Pita and Conchita are real strict about everything. Johnny National, for instance, can't go and play in the playroom if he hasn't first scrubbed all the dirt from under his fingernails, or if he hasn't combed his hair, or if he hasn't first brushed his teeth. Conchita showed him how to brush real good last week, up and down, up and down, dig into the back, in, out, in, out. It was a good thing Johnny National liked the flavor of toothpaste that tasted like peppermints.

It's almost Christmas now, you can see the Christmas trees in all the stores and on TV. And you can hear the Christmas music everywhere. I like "Silver Bells" the best, says Johnny National to himself as he sits, spread-eagle on the floor in a circle together with ten kids, including Suzie Sunset, and they are rolling a ball to each other back and forth, back and forth on the floor across the circle. One of Burlene Baboojin's assistants, Anita, said to him this morning that his fingernails were too long and that she would help him cut them

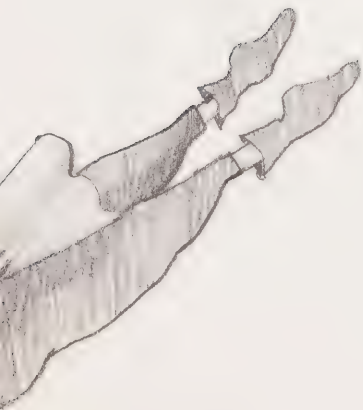


tomorrow. They're so nice, these assistants—Rita, Anita, Conchita, and Pita. And Burlene Baboojin, too, she's also nice. Johnny National likes them all very, very much, much prefers them to the cranky old Mrs. McBobbin who never cut his fingernails or helped him comb his hair or showed him how to brush his teeth with toothpaste that tasted like peppermints.

That was also the morning Burlene Baboojin brought a nurse with her, just showed up at the door with a tall white woman who had great, big eyes and a big, hooked nose, with glasses. Looks like an owl, Johnny National thought to himself as he sat there in the circle holding up his pink, plastic heart. The nurse's name was Jane something-or-other. But Johnny National was too busy rolling the ball across the floor to Suzie Sunset and holding up his heart to her—when Anita, the Metis assistant from northern Saskatchewan, said, “all people holding hearts stand up,” and Johnny National stood up, but Suzie Sunset didn't because she had a big, yellow diamond—Johnny National was too busy remembering that he had a heart to remember nurse Jane's last name. But when their game of rolling the ball back and forth across the circle to each other and telling hearts, triangles, circles, squares, rectangles, and diamonds apart, when this rather complicated game was over, nurse Jane promptly sat the kids down at the big round table and started combing through their hair with a funny-looking comb.

“Lice,” she explained she was looking for. She looked like a detective. When she found a “louse,” she killed it. Crushed it with the funny-looking comb against a piece of paper on the table. A louse—“louse,” “lice,” “louse,” nurse Jane kept changing it; she couldn't seem to make up her mind about it—but a louse, according to both nurse Jane and Burlene Baboojin, was not a good thing to have. It was unhealthy, it ate your blood, it made you itch, and it gave you scabs. On the head, right in there among the roots of the hair. “Besides,” said nurse Jane as she blinked once with her big owl eyes, “a louse is a big, ugly insect that looks like a spider.” When the whole examination was over and nurse Jane was gone, Johnny National was relieved to discover he didn't have lice. Suzie Sunset did, though. And she was very proud of it.

“Lice, lice,” she went singing and skipping out the door toward the closet for her coat, “lice, lice, I got lice, la-la-la...” So happy was Suzie Sunset, in fact, that Johnny National was jealous. She had lice. He didn't.



Outside, it was sunny, but brisk. There was a wind. But Johnny National played tag with the other kids. At first, Suzie Sunset was “it.” But she was too fast to be “it” for very long. So then, Johnny National was “it” for a while. When Anita explained that running was good for his legs, his muscles, his lungs, his body, and his heart, Johnny National decided that he was going to be “it” for the rest of his life. For that’s what he wanted was the strongest—and the fastest—pair of legs in the world. Then it was time to go in for hot chocolate.

In the old days—and here we mean the time of Johnny National’s great-grandparents, meaning Dorothy National’s grandparents, meaning Lazurus and Harriet’s parents—the Native people of northern Manitoba ate caribou. And lots of it. They also ate moose. They also ate the meat of many other animals such as porcupine, rabbit, beaver, even muskrat, just like the people of the plains ate buffalo, back in those days. And for many, many centuries before that.

Then there was the fowl, birds like goose, duck, ptarmigan, grouse, even a certain kind of loon, whenever necessity would demand. Then there was the fish, fish like trout which, in northern Manitoba, are as plentiful as stars in the sky—and huge, some as big as small alligators. Then there was the pickerel, the whitefish, pike, grayling, etc., etc., etc., keeping in mind, as well, that in all of Canada’s north, including northern Manitoba, there is actually more water than land—thousands of lakes, large and small, with thousands of islands, large and small, most surrounded by gold sand beaches or surfaces of granite that slope into the lake like water slides for otters. And water so fresh you can drink it every day without fear of contracting some horrible disease such as cancer. And there are very, very few people. Just fish. And birds and animals and the muskeg and the wind, all the way to the North Pole—the wealth of Canada’s north is beyond human imagining.

And then there was the plant-life, so many kinds of berries it would fill a book: raspberries, blueberries, cranberries, pincherries, strawberries, chokecherries etc., etc., etc., not to mention all the herbs. And all completely, utterly natural, with all the right vitamins, the right minerals, no artificial, chemical-related, non-organic ingredients. This was the diet of Johnny National’s ancestors. And because they had to work so hard to get all this food for themselves—there were, after all, no Seven-Elevens or Loblaws,



no Dairy Queens, McDonald's, or KFC's—because they would frequently have to walk twenty, thirty, or even forty miles just to track down their food, their bodies were fit. Fit to a T. Muscular. Sinuous. And thin.

Then, in the space of two generations, arrived the granulated sugar, the canned and processed meats full of artificial ingredients such as chemicals, steroids, antibiotics, food coloring, etc., meats such as Klik, Spam, Spork, Irish Stew, Chuckwagon Dinner. Then were the doughnuts, the cakes, the pies, pastries of every conceivable description piled high with glazes and sugared cream, not to mention all the candy and the cookies and the chocolate bars whose variety boggled men's minds—Kit Kat, Oh Henry, Sweet Marie, Eatmore, Cherry Blossom, Mr. Big, Coffee Crisp... Then there were the chips, in ten different flavors, plain and barbeque and garlic'n'onions and sour cream'n'vinegar and sour cream this and ketchup'n'vinegar that... Then there was the Coca-Cola, the Seven-up, the Sprite, the Orange Crush, the Root Beer, the pink Cream Soda, all came by the gallon. Gallons and gallons and gallons of this soda pop replaced all the clean freshwater and the teas made from natural herbs. Then there was the alcohol, the beer, the whisky, the vodka, the rum, the wine—the worst in the world, rotgut European winemakers could hardly wait to rid themselves of. And by the second generation of a people such as Johnny National's? What do you expect?

Family violence hit with a vengeance—men beat their wives right there in full view of their children using fists, firewood, hammers, shovels, stabbing them with knives, even chopping them with axes, shooting them with guns. And fat hit with a wallop. For the first time, there were unfit, overweight Indians everywhere. And diabetes? It hit with such devastation it practically paralyzed entire communities.

One story goes that there was so much diabetes on this one reserve—for all we know, it very well could be Johnny National's Little Star Falls—that fully one-quarter of the adult population was running around on only one leg because the other had been amputated due to the disease. Plastic prostheses being the new order of the day (although the Cree still call them "mistik ooskat," meaning "wooden leg"), prediction has it that, when all these one-legged people die, "there's gonna be one hell of a dance" on that reserve because of all the "wooden legs" that will be left behind. Picture such



a sight—a roomful of “wooden legs” jigging and jumping around like diamond drills, all by themselves! It almost makes you want to cry.

It's not far from the truth. All you have to do is look at Johnny National's own grandparents, Lazurus and Harriet National, both with one leg only, the other a prosthesis made of plastic. And it's only a matter of time, so doctors' prognoses go, that this old Cree couple loses the other leg. And slowly, toe by toe, finger by finger, limb by limb, succumb to an agonizing death..

The point here being that if Dorothy National's parents have the disease, chances are high that Dorothy National herself will be getting it too. Meaning that chances are high that little Johnny National will also get it soon. And that's just one disease. There's also AIDS, creeping up on Native communities right across the country person by person by person. It's just a matter of time. Or is it?

So, at the Kimoosoom Papoo Aboriginal Headstart Site, Johnny National gets a snack every day, in the middle of the morning. And through that snack, he is taught to avoid all the junk foods that made up almost his entire diet whenever he would find himself “staying” at Mrs. McBobbin's.

Two days ago, it was tiny, little tuna sandwiches packed into little pita bread triangles, the mashed fish mixed with chopped onions, mayonnaise, particles of celery. Johnny National liked these sandwiches, ate four of them right up, took five minutes. Yesterday, it was vegetable sticks piled high on a plate—carrots and broccoli and celery and cauliflower and red and green peppers, with some kind of creamy, white dip. Little Johnny National wasn't too crazy about this dish, but he had to eat it anyway, orders of Burlene Baboojin. Today, it was porridge covered with slices of banana poured over with maple syrup and fresh, cold milk. This was Johnny National's favorite. And tomorrow. Who knows what tomorrow will bring?

Big strong bones, strong, white teeth, shiny black hair, good, strong eyes that can see real far, nice, tight skin that won't break easily, explained Burlene Baboojin to the children as she pointed to a chart where little vegetable and sandwich people were running and jumping around like little grasshoppers. And they wouldn't get fat when they grew up, said Burlene Baboojin. And they wouldn't get sick. And, all their lives, they would have two legs.

At home, Dorothy National began to notice that Johnny wasn't getting colds as often as he used to, at least not the way he did in the days before he joined that Aboriginal Head Start Program. And, by



George, she was determined that her little boy would grow old with both legs firmly attached to him; the nutritional guidance she was getting from Burlene Baboojin, on the phone, would see to that. No more Coca Cola, in other words, at the apartment where lived Johnny National.

Ever since Dorothy National left Little Star Falls seven years ago, she hasn't had much reason to speak Cree, even though she speaks it fluently. On those three Fridays a month, when she drops Johnny off at her sister's place, and when she picks him at day's end, yes, then she might exchange a few words with Camelia Ocheestatay, words like "tansi?" ("how are you?") and "patima kawapamitin, nimis" ("I'll see you later, big sister"). But not much else. And Camelia Ocheestatay, for her part—mostly because her husband from Alberta has lost all his Cree—speaks only English at home, then that is the language that she uses with her nephew when he is in her care. And only very, very occasionally will Dorothy National teach her boys a Cree word.

The reasons behind this rather odd and unexpected situation are at least three-fold. 1) It hurts Dorothy National to use the language for it brings too much to mind her relationship with her family which, at best, is very, very painful. 2) Everything about the social situation that Dorothy National finds herself in, here in the city, tells her that English is the only language to be used; it's the pressure of the dominant culture. In other words, social pressure makes her too self-conscious to speak Cree in public. Or is she ashamed of it? Perhaps, but she's not telling, being the rather secretive, not very talkative person that she is. 3) That's all the kids hear everywhere around them is English, not least on the TV, which is on all the time, if not at the next door neighbor's, then at home. And if it's not on TV, it's on the radio. And at the movies. And in the streets. And downtown and everywhere else in the world, at least in the world as Johnny National knows it.

So, the only place he ever hears a language other than English is at Aboriginal Head Start. And, fortunately for him, that language is Cree. Sometimes Saulteaux, which is very much like Cree. And sometimes Sioux, which is completely unlike Cree. And, once or twice, it's been Inuktitut, which Burlene Baboojin's assistant, Pita from Pond Inlet, has shared with the children; Johnny National had never heard anything like it. Sometimes, it's even Ojibway, as spoken by Burlene Baboojin, which is almost like Saulteaux and

Cree, but not quite. But the Cree he hears comes from the mouth of none other than that old man who laughs all the time, Muskoosees Kimatayayapiyipiyay.

Muskoosees Kimatayayapiyipiyay, whose last name Johnny National has learned to say only up to the “Kimatie” part, comes in to sit with the kids once a week, generally on Monday mornings. Sometimes, he comes with his girlfriend, Maggie Moonias, a 97-year-old woman from Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, but generally, he comes alone, this mostly because Maggie Moonias, being so excessively old, is generally too tired to get out of bed. Still, at least once a month, the old girl braves the elements to come with her boyfriend. The laughing Muskoosees Kimatayayapiyipiyay, by the way, is only 84 years old, a “mere pup,” as Maggie Moonias calls him. On top of that, some other old people come in once in a while, but not as often as these two do.

Muskoosees Kimatayayapiyipiyay will generally sit right there at the little round table with the children—even though the posture is hard on his knees, the miniature children’s chairs standing lower than milking stools as they do. Still, though there are days when he can hardly get up afterward, the old man insists he sit at the same height as the children, so they can see “the white of his eyes,” as he says to them. And what he does from there is tell them stories, in Cree, stories that Johnny National didn’t understand, at least, not at first.

“Peeyag’wow oosooma meena, “Muskoosees would say to the children. He always seemed to start the same way, every time he came, with every story he would tell. But Johnny National knew one thing—he knew they were stories the old man was telling because Burlene Baboojin told them so.

“Peeyag’wow oosooma meena,” Muskoosees never paused to explain himself, he merely rattled on and on. And on and on and on. Johnny National would just sit there and watch his old lips going up and down, up and down. Sometimes, they even made him just a little sleepy.

“Peeyag’wow oosooma meena, Weesageechak kantaypapamootet. Eenootegateet sasay meena, taskootch kapee. Eentaymacheet isa. Hey, kinwees pimootew, pimootew, pimootew, pimootew...” (“Once upon a time, Weesageechak went for a walk. He was hungry again, like he always was. He was hunting. Oh, he walked for a long, long time, just walked and walked and walked...”)



Little Johnny National would just sit there and watch the lips going up and down, up and down. He had no idea what all those syllables meant. They merely sounded pretty, sometimes even like birds chirping, or like a little river babbling. Then he remembered, Johnny National did, his grandfather, Dorothy National's father Lazurus, speaking those same syllables, like birds chirping, or a little river babbling, that deep, old voice, so kind. All of a sudden, one morning, Johnny National found himself crying, right there in front of Muskoosees Kimatayayapiyiyay. But why? Why was he crying? Was it because this music, these river-like syllables, were welling up from deep inside his own little body from he knew not where, maybe even from the bottom of his heart?

His grandfather was dying, this much his mother had explained to him. He wouldn't be alive for very much longer. (And it was true, Dorothy National had told her little boy as much; now she was wrestling with her demons—when, how to steel her courage so she could get back on that bus with her two sons, go back to Little Star Falls just once more, if only to say good-bye to the old man who, if doctors' reports were to be believed, was more likely to “go” sooner than her mother. This was the ordeal that was tearing her apart as she would put her son on that van with George N. Smith to send him off to Aboriginal Head Start.) And Johnny National would sit there crying, because inside the voice of the Elder, Muskoosees's old voice, he somehow heard the voice of his own grandfather, spouting off an incomprehensible river of syllables, syllables like, “peeyag'wow oosooma meena, Weesageechak...”

One night, at supper, Johnny National asked his mother, “Mommy, what does ‘peeyag'wow oosooma meena...’ mean?”

Dorothy National was amazed, but tried not let it show too much. She didn't know why. All she knew was that someday, very soon, she would have to get back on that bus that went straight north, to Little Star Falls. All she knew was that she would have to go there soon to say “good-bye” to a certain old man.

“It means,” she said quietly to her son, “‘peeyag'wow oosooma meena’ means ‘once upon a time...’” She choked back a sob. Where on Earth had that lump in her throat come from anyway?

“And ‘Weesageechak?’” persisted Johnny National as he bit into the steamed Brussel sprout that he hated but knew he had to eat anyway, orders of one Burlene Baboojin.

“Weesageechak,” Dorothy National was finally able to continue, “was the greatest hero the Cree have ever known.” Thank God, she had finished the sentence. “But he was crazy.” Ha! Finally, she had found the strength to turn back to her son, face him directly and tell him the truth.

“Hey!” A funny little thought had just landed right inside her head, not unlike that sparrow had landed on that oak tree branch outside her window just one second earlier. “Maybe...” the funny little thought continued, “maybe that’s how she and this little boy of hers would have their little heart-to-heart talks from now on, in Cree.”

“Why?” Johnny National challenged his mother, as if to a duel, “why was he crazy?”

“Athis igwani mana kapee igoosi eegeesee-ayat Weesageechak...” (“Because Weesageechak was born that way...”), said Dorothy National. And she told Johnny—and Cody—one whole Weesageechak story. In Cree.

Johnny National didn’t get it all, but he got the gist of it, both from the hand actions his mother used to tell the story, and from the tone of her voice. And from the few words he had learned from that laughing old man at “school,” the old man with the unpronounceable name.

Weeks later, as Maggie Moonias baked raisin bannock for the kids’ daily snack in the Aboriginal Head Start kitchen, she decided she would tell the kids crushed all around her a story.

“Peeyag’wow oosooma meena,” she began. And Johnny National understood exactly what she was saying, at least the first part of it.

Easter was coming up soon and Johnny National was all excited. He was excited because he was going to bring his mother to “school.” He had tried before because Burlene Baboojin had made the suggestion. And try as Johnny National might to get her to come, Dorothy National had still been too angry to say, “yes.” Angry at who? The father of her two boys, useless, deadbeat dads, cowards that they were? Angry at her family, for cutting her off so cruelly like that? Angry at herself? For being so weak and not fighting back, for not standing up for her rights? Or angry at life?

But, at least, something was happening to her Johnny that had actually wakened somewhere deep inside her, some ray of hope, dim as it was. Good God, she hadn’t even gone to Johnny’s “school” for



that Christmas party he had tried to get her to come to. True, that witch, Mrs. Pocklin, at the Radisson Hotel couldn't afford to give her an afternoon off—"the busy season," she had whined, "the very height of our busy season!" But she could have fought back, even at the risk of losing her job. Then again, Christmas had been looming. And how else was a single mother to afford Christmas presents for her children than to stick with the one job she knew she had for certain? Thank God, that angel of mercy, Camelia Ocheestatay, had gone to that Christmas party in her place.

And now, her son's Easter Bunny party was facing her square in the face like this? No way, she was going to miss this one. She gritted her teeth and asked Mrs. Pocklin for not only an afternoon but a whole day off. She got it. After all, could the witch, this time around, hide behind the excuse of, "the busy season?" No. Of course not.

So that night, as she tucked her son into his little bed, in the corner of the room that all three—mother and two sons—shared, she had whispered to him, about the Easter Bunny party.

"Ahow. Kaweecheewitin wapagi," she said to him. ("Yes, of course. I'll come with you tomorrow. For sure, I'll come with you, i.e., I wouldn't miss it for the world.") Little did she know, at the time, that way at the back of her mind lurked another thought, hazy, unclear, quite unformed. All she knew—and this only later—was that it had something to do with a bus. And with the month of June, when Johnny National had his birthday.

Finally, the day of the Easter Bunny party arrived. Far from being her usual rushed, panicked self, Dorothy National took her time eating breakfast with her sons—fresh, hot porridge sprinkled with sliced-up bananas, drowning in maple syrup, and fresh, thick homogenized milk, the maple syrup a birthday gift, to Dorothy, from Camelia Ocheestatay, the menu "stolen" from a phone conversation with Burlene Baboojin. And right on the button, the second all three—mother and two sons—had finished brushing their teeth, George N. Smith tooted his horn on the street outside—the van had arrived. Cody ran off to school. And Johnny National proudly stepped into the van with his mother close behind.

She looked so beautiful, with her jet-black hair all done up in curls, her deep, dark eyes like coals, her gentle lower lip. And her skin—brown as a berry.



The spring air was chilly but bracing. Johnny National insisted the window be open just a little. And there was sunshine everywhere. As the van traveled up one street and down another, its seats filling up with kids, Johnny and his mother could see purple flowers sprouting up here and there—"crocuses," Dorothy National explained to her son, "neepeegana."

"Neepagana," Johnny National echoed. They got to Kimoosoom Papoo.

The party itself wouldn't be starting till the end of the morning session but Dorothy had arranged with Burlene Baboojin that she would spend the first hour helping the children make mud pies and cookies with their piles of play-doh, the second with teaching them to name the different parts of their faces in Cree.

The first part was easy for Johnny National. He made fish-shaped cookies for Suzie Sunset, whom he was sure he was in love with by now and would marry as soon as he was five years old—he and Suzie had already made all the arrangements. Then he dropped the fish-shaped cookie cutter and grabbed a star-shaped one.

"Achagoos," explained Dorothy National as she sat there beside Johnny, for Suzie Sunset had run off to play on the computer.

"Achagoos," echoed Johnny National.

"It means 'star'," said Dorothy National. "But it can also mean 'spirit.' So 'Achoogoosis' means 'little star,' or it can also mean, 'little spirit.'" And she explained to the six other kids sitting at the big round table with Johnny National that they—that is, she and her little boy—came from a reserve called, "Achagoosis Falls" in northern Manitoba. And so the cookie-cutting went. Johnny National was having such a good time, making cookies and speaking Cree, that he never even knew that an hour had just come and gone.

For next thing he knew, he was sitting in another part of the room, on the floor this time, following his mother who was touching her eyes and saying, "miskeesig'wa," intending that all the kids there follow her example. And that's what they did. They pointed to their eyes and said, all together, "miskeesig'wa."

"Meetawagaya," said Dorothy National to the kids, and she touched her ears.

"Meetawagaya," said the kids, and they all touched their ears.

"Nitap'skun," said Dorothy National to the kids, and she touched her chin.





“Nitap’skun,” said the kids, and they all touched their chins.

When Johnny National looked up after this very fun game, there sat the laughing Muskoosees Kimatayayapiyiyay and his girlfriend, Maggie Moonias. There were also about six other “Elders,” as Burlene Baboojin called them, and a whole bunch of other adults, who were introduced, by the same Burlene Baboojin, as “parents.” Suzie Sunset’s parents—their names were Wanda Sunset and Kevin Sunset—were very well-dressed. She was a dentist and he was a teacher, Suzie Sunset had bragged to Johnny National just the day before.

Then the Easter Bunny jumped into the room—she had the face of Anita, Burlene Baboojin’s Metis assistant—but Johnny National never let on that he knew. For, quite frankly, he quickly forgot. The big Easter Bunny promptly announced that there were Easter eggs hidden all over the place and everyone there—children and parents and Elders—were to get down on all fours and hunt for them. Then she put some music on. And the hunt was on.

“Peeyuk,” (“one”) laughed Muskoosees Kimatayayapiyiyay as he surfaced with an egg.

“Neesoo,” (“two”) said Maggie Moonias as she surfaced with two eggs and almost keeled over.

“N’stoo,” (“three”) said Dorothy National as she surfaced with three eggs.

“Neeyoo,” (“four”) said Johnny National as he surfaced with four eggs. But Suzie Sunset and her parents, Wanda and Kevin, were the winners. For they found ten eggs between them. And they said, all together, “wikcemna,” which, apparently, means “ten” in Sioux.

And as the children ate their chocolate eggs—“the one time they’re allowed to eat sweets,” explained Burlene Baboojin to the parents, “other than at Christmas”—Dorothy National sat there with the Coordinator of the program (the same Burlene Baboojin) and they talked. Dorothy quickly admitted that she had been remiss in not coming to the site as often as she should but that, as she had seen her little boy make such remarkable progress in just seven months, she would be sure to come to all the monthly meetings, help out whenever she could, even if she had to quit her job at the Radisson Hotel and find herself a new boss who would be more sympathetic to her status as a single mother.

It was June now, the 25th of June, to be precise, Johnny National’s birthday—he was five now. And here he was, sitting on the bus beside his older brother, Cody National, his mother in the seat

behind them. And a trip to Achagoosis Falls was his birthday present. He was so excited he could barely sit still. For they were on their way north to Achagoosis Falls, Achagoosis Falls, for Johnny National much preferred the Cree name now. He was proud as a rooster, in fact, that he could say it perfectly. And knew both meanings of the word.

“Achagoosis Falls, Achagoosis Falls...” now that he wasn’t too shy to speak out loud in front of people, especially his own family, he would say the word as often as he could. “Achagoosis, Achagoosis, Achagoosis...” He started singing, “Achagoosis Falls,” quietly to himself as he sat there looking out the window. He could see the barns, one after another after another, and the farmers’ tractors, the horses and the cows, the land flat as a table.

And Dorothy National sat behind her sons, her face practically white with anticipation. And with fear. For this would be the first time she would be seeing her family after that terrible fight three years ago. Oh, she was so glad that she had found that program for her younger son, “Kimoosoom Papoo. Even the name made her laugh. Because for sure, that’s what Johnny National’s “kimoosoom” would do when he saw his little grandson was laugh. What choice would he have?

Yes, she was so, so very glad she had found that program. For once she had been able to shake off her fear of the dreaded Mrs. Pocklin at the Radisson Hotel. Ever since, she had gone to join her son as often as she could—baking bannock in the kitchen, helping the children with their finger-painting, helping them count to twenty in Cree. For just being with them made her feel ashamed or embarrassed no longer about speaking the language in the city. No, she wasn’t shy about it anymore. She had lost all her fear. If anything, she was determined now that her sons would grow up speaking the language, fluently, maybe even passing it on to their own children when the time came. If only for that reason had she decided—not without some coaxing from the indefatigable Burlene Baboojin of course—that she would join the parents’ steering committee that met one evening every month, to help guide the program.

And through this method had she gotten to know the parents of the other children as well as that funny, laughing old man, Muskoosees Kimatayayapiyiyay. Was he not, after all, the one who had finally coaxed her into seeing that family counselor who



had counseled her out of her “family crisis,” who had counseled her out of her anger at her family up north, who had made her realize that the “estrangement” had been just as much the fault of her own anger as it had been of her family’s? Yes, sure, Burlene Baboojin had urged her to see that counselor. So had two of the parents on the committee.

But, in the end, it was the laughing old man and his kindly old girlfriend, Maggie Moonias, who had convinced her. Their words—in Cree, of course—had made her cry. Especially the part where they started talking about the death of the Elders. And that this visit might be the very last chance for her to talk to her father and her mother. For it was true, they were not well. Had Camelia Ocheestatay, in fact, not recently informed her that there was talk Lazurus National might have to have a second leg amputated? He was fading, said Camelia Ocheestatay. But, finally, it was the Elders sitting there in a corner of the playroom with her, the three of them watching the children busy with their finger-painting. And the two old people telling her, “Eehee, tageegeewewin, ooma Dorothy. Tageentay-amee-achik kitooteemak...” (“Yes, Dorothy, you must go home. You must go home and talk to your parents, your people. It will be good for Johnny. It will be good for your children...”) How could someone not cry after words like that?

She pulled her eyes away from her sons’ heads bobbing up and down in the seat in front of her. Never had she seen Johnny smile so much. Or look so healthy—had he not grown three whole inches in the past five months alone?

She looked out the window. The farmland was giving way bit by bit to forest, to bush. The lakes of northern Manitoba were swallowing them. And they were calling.

“Achagoosis Falls, Achagoosis Falls...” they sang to her in a little boy’s sparrow-like, chirpy little voice, “Achagoosis, Achagoosis, Achagoosis...”

And so, referred there, guided there by the Aboriginal Head Start Program, she had gone—with her Johnny—to the Social Services and made an appointment with the counselor. And she had gone to see that counselor, a kind, white woman named Mary Sanderson. And telling Dorothy National the same thing the Elders had told her, but more. She, Mary Sanderson, told her, Dorothy National, that her anger was eating her up. And what’s more, that, if she kept it inside her, it would eventually do her in, that she was only making her

own life miserable. “An unhappy mother doesn’t make for very happy children,” she had said, and many other things besides.

And Johnny National stood there looking at his mother. And he knew that she was hurting. So he hugged her, hugged her deep and strong.

Yes, Dorothy National was glad that she had found Burlene Baboojin and the Aboriginal Head Start Program. She was on her way, on her way to Achagoosis Falls, yes, but on her way to a better future for her and her sons. Maybe, when she got back, she would find some way of taking some night courses, upgrade her education, get a better-paying job. Especially now that Johnny National was about to enter kindergarten, ready for the experience as she never had imagined he would ever be.

Johnny National looked out the window. The sun was setting. It was getting dark. And he was getting sleepy. In fact, he was already half-asleep. And in his dream, Lazurus National came to him, floating through the trees like a soft, warm wind. And Lazurus National, entering the spirit world at that very same hour, smiled at him.

And Lazurus National said to him, his voice the babbling of a river, “Eehee, noos’sim. Kwayus igwa kagithow keegway taytapinigun...” (Yes, my grandson. Everything will be okay now...)”)

And little Johnny National, now flying just above the bus in his Superman cape, flying north to his home, understood every word said to him by the old man, Lazurus.

The End.



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Division of Childhood and Adolescence
Health Canada
Tunney's Pasture
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Postal Locator 1909C2
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K1A 0K9

Enquiries in English: (613) 952-5845

Enquiries in French: (613) 952-5845

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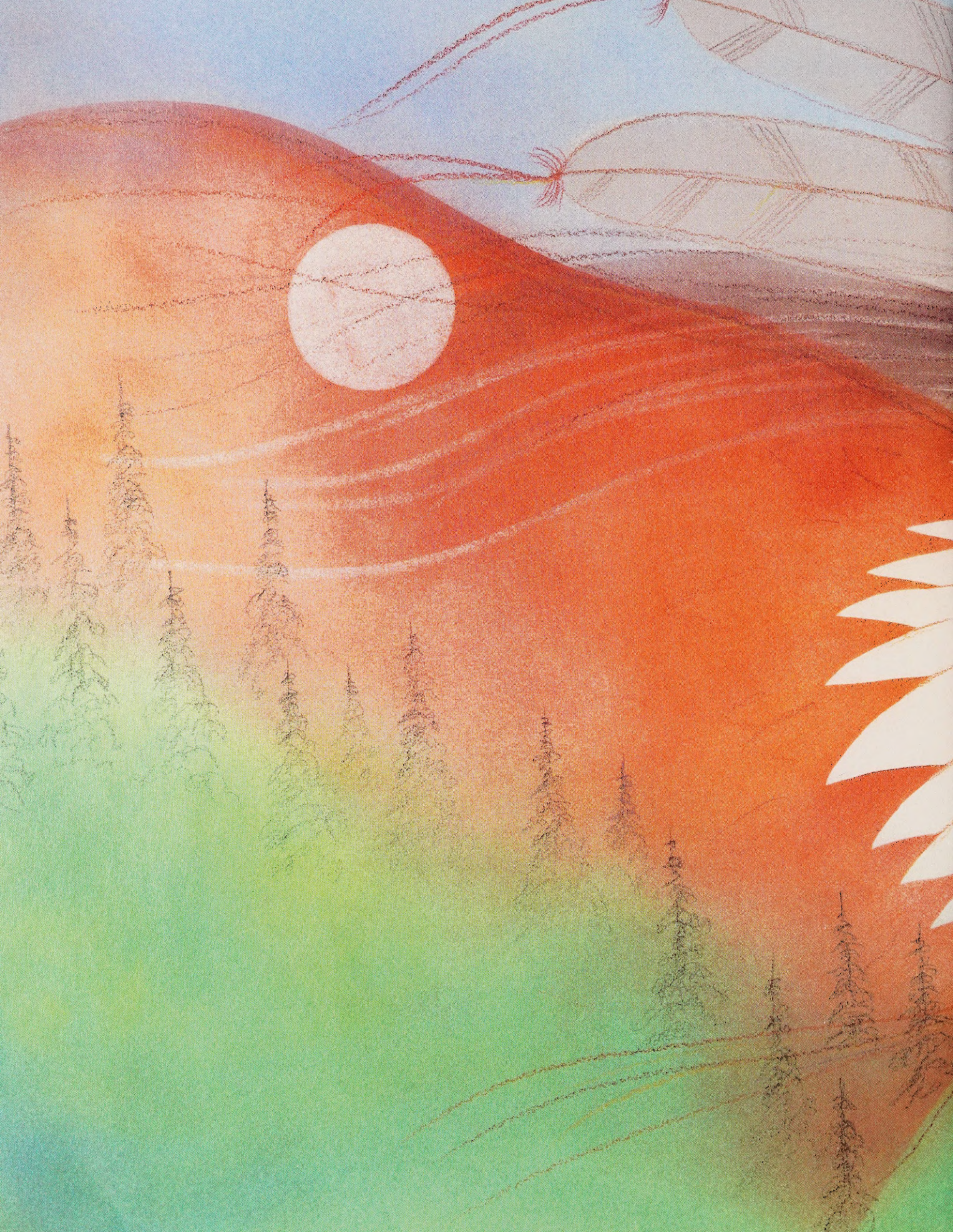
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Tomson Highway

Tomson Highway is a Cree, born on the trapline at Brochet, in northern Manitoba. He is the celebrated author of the award winning plays *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. His first novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, published in 1998, was nominated for the Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award and CBA Libris Fiction Book of the Year Award. He has three honorary degrees and is a Member of the Order of Canada. He was the recipient of an Aboriginal Achievement Award in 2001 in recognition of his contributions in Art and Culture. Artistic producer Martin Bragg observes: "Tomson is not only a role model and inspiration for the Native community, he is a Canadian who has inspired us all to challenge ourselves both as artists and human beings."

Tomson Highway lives in Toronto.

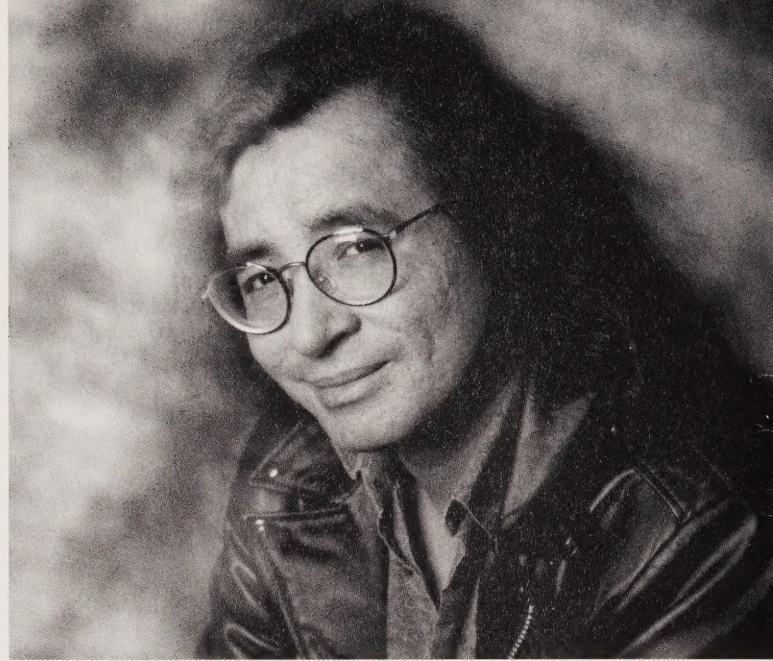


Photo: Claude Bouchard

Leo Yerxa

Leo Yerxa was born in 1947 on the Little Eagle Reserve near Fort Frances in northern Ontario. He has written and illustrated two children's books. His first book, *Last Leaf First Snowflake to Fall*, was nominated for a Governor General's Literary Award and won the Amelia Frances Howard-Gibbon Award, the Mr. Christie's Book Award and the Elizabeth Mrazik Cleaver Award.